

Rhode Island: William Peck

Unlike many of his peers, William Peck's career began with a rapid rise to prominence, but quickly descended to an unfortunate end. Born on December 15, 1755, in Lyme, CT, Peck began his career in public service with a promising start. Soon after graduating from Yale in 1775, Peck joined the Continental Army as a First Lieutenant. Within two years, according to a resume he sent to President Washington, Peck rose to rank of lieutenant colonel with the title of Deputy Adjutant General of the Eastern Department. Peck maintained this rank, until he retired from military service in December 1781.^{35 36}

In the interim period between the end of the Revolutionary War and Rhode Island ratifying the U.S. Constitution on May 29, 1790, Peck tried to support his second wife and four children by pursuing various business



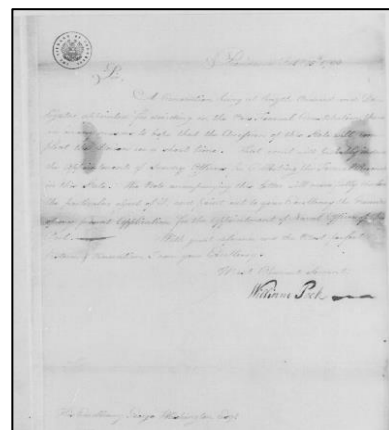
Rhode Island's former U.S. marshal Donald W. Wyatt pays homage to William Peck
Courtesy of the U.S. marshal Service

opportunities, but he almost found himself in debtor's prison.³⁷

By the time President Washington offered him the position of U.S. marshal, Peck was in dire financial straits and he accepted the position in the summer of 1790.³⁸

Since Rhode Island did not ratify the Constitution until after the start of the census, Congress granted Peck and his fourteen deputies an extension to complete their enumeration.³⁹ Although Peck's final 1790 census return

does not have the exact date of when he received the final count from his deputies, it does record that Rhode Island had a total population of 68,825 people.⁴⁰ This made the second



Soon after Rhode Island ratified the U.S. Constitution in 1790, William Peck petitioned President Washington for the lucrative position of Naval Officer of Providence's port.
Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

³⁵ "History - The First Generation of United States Marshals/The First Marshal of Rhode Island: William Peck," U.S. marshals Service, last estimated release October 15, 2019, <https://www.usmarshals.gov/history/firstmarshals/peck.htm>. (Accessed October 15, 2019).

³⁶ "To George Washington from William Peck, 15 February 1790," *Founders Online*, National Archives, last estimated release September 29, 2019, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/05-05-02-0087>. (Accessed October 15, 2019). [Original source: *The Papers of George Washington*, Presidential Series, vol. 5, 16 January 1790–30 June 1790, ed. Dorothy Twohig, Mark A. Mastromarino, and Jack D. Warren. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996, pp. 149–150.]

³⁷ "History - The First Generation of United States Marshals/The First Marshal of Rhode Island: William Peck".

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ W.S. Rossiter, "The First Census of the United States," p. 43.

⁴⁰ U.S. Congress, House, *An Act giving effect to the laws of the United States within the state March 2, 1791. of Vermont*, NA, 1st Cong., 3rd sess., NA. PDF. last estimated release (October 15, 2019)

<https://www.loc.gov/law/help/statutes-at-large/1st-congress/c1.pdf>. [Original Source: Richard Peters, *The Public*

smallest state (not including Tennessee, which was still a territory in 1790-91) in terms of population. Today, Rhode Island is the eighth least populous state in the United States with a population of 1,057,315 people.⁴¹

In addition to providing a record of Rhode Island's population in 1790-91, the 1790 census schedule notes that Peck presented Rhode Island's 1790 census returns to both President Washington and Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson in September 1791.⁴² Thus, Peck and his deputies were able to complete the enumeration of Rhode Island's population within the initial deadline established by Congress.

After completing the census, Peck continued to perform his duties as a marshal for another 19 years, making him the longest-tenured of the original sixteen. However, after retirement, Peck's financial troubles continued until his death on May 19, 1832.⁴³ Ultimately, William Peck, who served the United States honorably as a soldier and as one of the first U.S. marshals, died penniless.⁴⁴

Statues at Large of the United States of America/From the Organization of the Government in 1789, to March 3, 1845, vol. 1 (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1845), pg. 197.]

⁴¹ "QuickFacts: Rhode Island," U.S. Census Bureau, last estimated release July 1, 2018, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/RI>. (Accessed October 15, 2019).

⁴² "Summary of population, by counties and towns [of Rhode Island]: 1790," in *Heads of Families/1790/A Century of Population Growth Massachusetts, Connecticut, & Rhode Island* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1908), 2:9.

⁴³ "History - The First Generation of United States Marshals/The First Marshal of Rhode Island: William Peck."

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*